DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 373 348 CS 214 475

AUTHOR Toso, N. Erec
TITLE On the Personal Essay, Mentoring, and Conversation.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Graduate Students; Higher Education; *Interests; Mentors; *Personal Autonomy; Professional Autonomy; *Rhetoric
IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse Communities; Composition Theory; Conversation; Social Constructivism; Student Empowerment

ABSTRACT

A graduate student in a language program finds himself running out of reasons to write. He has been gaining a power of words but has been losing something at the same time, some autonomy or sense of community, of place, of being "somebody." Having spent several years teaching in a public high school, he returned to the university to learn that the expressivist theories of Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, and Brenda Ueland had been superseded by social constructivists such as David Bartholomae, Kenneth Bruffee, and Patricia Bizzell. Both these schools seek to empower, to mentor: one through finding a self, the other through mastering the social codes to gain membership into a discourse community. This student's concern with the latter group, the social constructivists, is that its emphasis on the rules of social discourse leaves little room for questioning, for dissenting, for the self to engage in dialogue with the group. Unfortunately, similar assumptions underlie most areas of practice in the field of rhetoric, including its views on views on language, learning and mentorship. Conversation is in short supply in this student's teaching, studying, and mentor-to-mentoree relationships. Constructivists, with all their radical leanings, seem to forget the potentially life-robbing capacity of a collective identity with its own rules. Uncritical community membership is not radical, but stifling. (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

N. Erec Toso

ED 373 348

On the Personal Essay, Mentoring, and Conversation

One skill is needed--lost today, unfortunately--for the practice of reading as an art: the skill to ruminate, which cows possess, but modern man lacks.

Nietzsche--*The Genealogy of Morals*

When he opens his eyes he gives to what he gazes at
the recognition no look ever before granted it.
It becomes a word. Shuddering, it takes wing.

Denise Levertov--*The Freeing of the Dust*

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
N. E. Toso

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

While teaching Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" to a class of unusually recalcitrant English 101 students, I was struck by an unpleasant epiphany. Mine was not Emerson's epiphany on the commons, nor was it Joyce's enchantment. Instead, my focusing evanescence was one penetrating through the noise of teaching and graduate school to reveal, in starkest relief, my circumstance: a teacher estranged from "out there," the "real," other than university world, teaching content estranged from the world beyond the gates.

While we were reading a passage from "Letter" that I had copied to a transparency, some of King's arrangement and terms struck me. Specifically, at the end of the parallel, nine "when you..." clauses that answer to the liberal advice to "wait" comes the most egregious of injustices: not lynching, nor the sting of names, but something more insidious, ineffable, a composite of the sum of political and discursive

CS214475

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

practices, "the degenerating sense of 'nobodiness.'" I was struck by this, because King's "nobodiness" named an sense I felt during seminars, a sense that had not yet lent itself to words, but lurked beneath a hazy dissonance. Nobodiness felt like the persona I had been grooming in graduate school writing, as well as perpetuating in my teaching. I had left my "somebodiness" behind in order to better fit the abstract, thesis-driven discourse of what I thought constituted scholarship.

The moment passed, but the ensuing crisis of negotiating a professional identity that has room for the bricolage of life experience continues. I wonder if I am becoming the professor who once cautioned the class to "Watch out, or you'll end up like me. One day I was in first grade playing with my crayons, the next day I was in graduate school wondering what had happened." The prospect is dangerous and disturbing to me because it implies a complete and utter dichotomy between what Spellmeyer calls the "life world" and what could be called the university world, or what Louise Rosenblatt separates as sense making in personal terms or universal terms. What is most disturbing is my growing complicity and acquiescence to this split. Perhaps I am on my way to approximating the "scholarship boy" Rodriguez cites in his *Hunger of Memory* , the student "piling up knowledge..., received opinions..., acquiring facts rather than handling and using facts." Or Mike Rose's feared fate of the analysis-bound academic chasing the "little known fact, the lost letter, the lucky fissure in language that invites one more special reading" (76). Wallace Stevens, who Rose sees as "consumed by the tension between the vital but uncontrollable natural world" and that world "crafted and orderly but artificial," (76) could not confine his writing to the narrow conventions of the academic. Rose found that he couldn't either. Were those my choices? Life world or university world?

The split seemed and seems a false dichotomy, like the dichotomy between rhetoric and poetics, between creative writing and argument, between literature and essay, between art and rhetoric. My seminars had cultivated this split; the wave of history washing over rhetoric had purged rhetoric of art, of imagination, and of experience.

I found myself in the middle of a graduate program in language running out reasons to write, and had lost the thread somewhere, had forgotten the desires that had led me to graduate school. I remember wondering how the progression undertaken by the crayons professor was possible :m guessing now that he somehow turned off, fell asleep, conformed and fell into consensus without resisting, questioning or learning a lick. But he was on the other side of the podium; he had the authority over words. Yet he represented a contradiction I could only vaguely frame at the time.

On the one hand, he represented the world of words, and, to me, words were gained through struggle. On the other hand, this professor was a man of words, a man who seemed emptied of politics, spirit, and who didn't have an insurgent bone in his body. His candid comment spoke disturbing volumes of the cost of entry into the university.

I wondered if it really was that easy, if there was something inaccurate in understanding derived from experience. Could movement through academic levels be so unconscious, so organic, so natural? It had been difficult for me to get this far--my second year as an undergraduate at a big midwestern university-- and the remark disturbed me, raising questions I have yet to answer. Movement within the structures called the university, I felt was much more complex. I was getting something--a power of words-- but I was losing something, some autonomy or sense of community, of place. The complexity was exacerbated by the sense I had

of entering limbo: being a student, I was no longer there, in my background, but neither had I arrived at another "there," as a writer or teacher. Being a student, being in limbo, in the classroom, could have provided a container, a forum, for the questions I felt but could not frame. I had no time, however, nor encouragement, for ruminating on the questions about the place of somebodiness, of dissonance, of disjunction in university learning.

Nor did I have the authority to read. I saw my professors like the Grand Inquisitor in The Brothers Karamozov who after discovering that Christ has returned to earth executes Him anyway. The Grand Inquisitor told Christ that his teachings could offer no improvement on the interpretations that the Church had already made orthodox. The system had no room for new readings.

It is no wonder that sitting through classes in comparative literature, I felt unsuited, unprepared. I didn't speak the language of literature, rhetoric, or linguistics departments. The thorny hedges of discourse that held together a large English department felt impenetrable. Men in my family had been truck drivers, farmers, and soldiers. They worked with their backs, not with their pens. They could not understand why I opted to chase words. "It was not our place," I was once told, "to talk, or to ask questions." Talk is a province of privilege, an expression of rank, and of pretense. The men I knew viewed talk with contempt. One of them had a large poster in his kitchen which pictured a muscular, sweat covered steel-worker beneath the question "What do we need more--engineers or another thesis on Shakespeare?" I carried the inheritance and suspicion men have of words and the tricks words can play. But, when I stood my ground, by going out the back door, their fear and scorn turned to a kind of quiet praise, or distance, or unwillingness to question when I went to the

university to study English. They sensed, I think, the power that words can have, even if scorned.

I had to make myself up as I went along. It was rough going because most of what I brought with me as experience had little use. My only guides were sketchy phrases and fragments of ideas gleaned from high school English and history classes. I didn't know how to do what I had undertaken. In class and in seminars, I played the game of study left-handed, handicapped. And I wrote. I was lucky, sometimes, to have had teachers who could listen as well as instruct, talk.

I remember a teacher who asked us to write our experience. I plunged into memory and image of the piece-work I had done in a truck body factory and the farm labor that had enabled me to pay for the first semesters of college. I wrote the tractors; and I wrote the daredevils who jumped from semi trailer roof to semi trailer roof to save time, gaining an edge on their wages while their bodies risked breaking on the concrete floor twelve feet below. I wrote frustration, love, and howling loneliness of questions unasked.

That teacher heard my voice. She reached across the chasm separating my experience from university conventions. She said we needed people to tell their stories. We needed people to take a stand, to enter the big talk, the important conversations, to think, and to convey a perspective built on experience. She defied the nobodiness of an epistemology of certainty, passivity, and indifference. She affirmed the role of life world in writing, dancing deftly the dance of mentor.

***

Ten years later, I was teaching English in a too-large urban high school in the southwest. A failure and victim of burn out, I wanted out of

the life world, away from the chaos of the classroom, away from the toughs who had as little interest in writing as I had in fist fights. I had not taught students to find their voices, ideas, or stories, and my naive notions of journaling, freewriting, and cooperative learning that had delivered me from education classes fit my students as poorly as Procrustes' bed fit his unfortunate travellers. Well-meaning, classless, Rogerian methods became less important than expedience: keep 'em busy, and don't let them talk. Romance had knuckled under to district requirements and my own inability. I had become a grammar cop and adversary. I didn't like my role, so I was going back.

I was going back to order, back to seminars, groomed lawns, and lazy mornings with time to think over coffee and literature.

***

Between the time I left the university to teach and the time I returned to study rhetoric there had been a change in the guard. I had cut my teeth on "expressivist" theories espoused by Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, and Brenda Ueland. Expressivist views valued the discovery of "voice," strategies like "freewriting," and placed a high value on a sense of self. Critics of expressivist teaching, such as David Bartholomae, Kenneth Bruffee, and Patricia Bizzell, saw its free associating (voice,self, and pathos-driven practices) as dangerous, too relative, and apolitical. They posed a counter perspective valuing social uses and conventions at the base of a knowledge which was constructed and maintained by members of separate communities and disciplines. Where before I had felt excited by the theories informing the teaching of writing, I now felt baffled. I wanted to get on the socially constructed bandwagon, but the nagging question of the self and roles of the self, of somebodiness kept nagging at me. By not

enthusiastically buying the new line I found myself in the position of "reactionary" in seminars, accused of defending notions of "bourgeois, romantic individualism."

I was, and continue to be, well apprised of the consequences of dissent via a recurring joke floating around graduate seminars. It takes place at a conference where all the big names in the field have gathered to hear a presentation. Unaware of the taboos of the community, a graduate student offers up a naive, unhip comment. Here, the instructor smiles at us, says "You could just hear the teeth being sharpened as they moved in for the kill," and follows up with a throaty chuckle. Most of the class laughs nervously. We students are thinking of the jobs we might or might not get after our training.

But the subtexts of the message are what I find most interesting. The rigidity implied by the "community's" conformity, its method of handling dissent speaks volumes about the assumptions underlying views of self, community, and learning. Both expressivist and social constructivist views of teaching seek to empower, to mentor: one through finding a self, the other through mastering social codes to gain membership. Both the notion of self and of community are static; there is very little contact, conflict, complication, or dynamic interplay between the two.

My experience teaching high school had shown be some of the dangers inherent in uncritically eliciting a "self" into the classroom. Many of those fourteen-year-old selves showed up with no intention of dialogue either with me or with the group, but had the simple agenda of raising hell. Teaching writing to them didn't work, because writing is usually involves an "other," a reader, an audience, something to say to that audience, and a persona who wants to convey some message. We, my students and I, never got to first base.

Nobody (really) showed up, no authentic "self" anyway. The self I have in mind here is one described best by Martin Buber. Buber's self is one capable of conversation, of criticism (both received and offered), and of change. His is the self of identification with an other rather than of persuasion or combat. He contends that, within an arena of mutual respect an "I" (self) and a "Thou" (other, community) can generate a "Between" that belongs exclusively to neither; both is the product of both the "I" and "Thou." In my high school classes there was no "I," no "Thou,"so it's not surprising there was no "Between." I had the ability. The students had the ability. But neither of us had the willingness to engage in the unpredictable, chaotic, epistemic phenomenon called dialogue. I pretentiously, patronizingly, and mistakenly took on the role of alchemist in the process of student forming. I thought that the act of writing would work some kind of magic on them, that they would undergo freewriting, looping, doubting and believing and somehow "form."

Ironically, I don't think I participated, nor did I listen for questions. I invited only the official selves of the students, the selves that submitted to school games. I couldn't see that they might want something else, might want their worlds to be different, that they might be bumping up against problems I could only guess at, waiting for a "Thou" both to listen to them and to challenge them.

The second problematic term--community--tends to be seen by teachers as neutral, apolitical, free from power relations. Teachers' "communities of writers" are viewed by constructionists as crucibles where writing conventions are forged, where subjectivity gives way to what Foucault would call "truth games." Knowledge of collective conventions is seen as leading to "empowerment," but the empowerment is one achieved by accommodation to convention. Constructionism encourages teaching

rules of social discourse, but leaves little room to question or to dissent, discouraging a conversation between a self and the group.

For example, a few semesters ago I was discussing possible dissertation interests with a professor. I told him I was interested in exploring the possible pedagogical complications and rhetoric of the personal essay. My stand on this, was, I thought, pretty clear. The professor responded by dismissing the idea as a petty bourgeois, belleletristic holdover and encouraged me to drop the idea. He wanted me to concentrate instead on the social uses of the essay. The message underlying this exchange was that I should drop a subjective interest and join the group. A corollary being that in order to join the group, the field of rhetoric, I should abandon personal interests or give up a personal stake in the areas I wanted to study. Dialogue on this subject was stillborn, despite the sense I still have that a discussion about a schism between personal and social uses, views, ownership of the genre we call essay would have been fruitful.

I don't think that I was *right*, nor that he was *wrong*, but I do see a critical weakness in the field of rhetoric, perhaps all disciplines, in how it views language, learning, and mentorship. The weakness stems from a rigidity of thought, language and conceptual form that discounts the roles of dialogue, dissent, valuing hierarchy over conversation. The line in my graduate program runs something like "Learn the field, submit to the rules, then begin to think for yourself and push back the limits." I agree that I need to be aware of the structures in rhetoric, but I learn them by bumping up against them, by translating them into language I can understand, by using my experience, my somebodiness, to read them. The whole process of study, of mentoring can be a conversation.

Conversation is in short supply in both my teaching and my studying. The price for its absence is a reification of thought that systematically engenders nobodiness. Rigid, ossified, institutionalized form constitutes the domain of totalitarian thought--either of the left or of the right--and is hostile to critical dynamism. Innovation comes from resistance; conformity comes from submission. Mentoring needs to incorporate conversation that answers and engages dissent, that moves in the interstice between subjectivity and the truth games of various disciplines, learning to not take the forms we have built so seriously that they preclude conversation.

The form mentoring has taken for me in graduate school could be translated as grooming to publish. Specifically, I have been encouraged to publish only in professional journals--the writing that "counts" (can be a line on a vita) . I don't know how I can move from here (graduate student) to there (publishing graduate student) without surrendering something of somebodiness. Maybe I don't belong in this field, but I have yet to plug my life world into academic argument. But I have come this far by following interests. I doubt I would have stayed the drudgery university study can become if some mentors (mainly women) had not heard and reached and invited me to join the fray, to find the words that I would use to construct a perspective. As peripheral participants in the university, women seem to know better than men, that knowledge is perspectival, a critical premise on which to base an authentic notion of community. Real communities are complex, full of holes, disjunction, and contradiction, a flux of shifting power relations that can coerce as easily as empower. Constructivists, with all their radical leanings seem to forget the potentially life robbing capacity of a collective identified with its own rules. Uncritical community membership is not radical, but stifling.

Authentic mentors recognize the needs and forms community can take, but also recognize community imposed limitations, specifically the danger inherent in uncritically privileging convention. Through these mentors, I have found a way to contend with nobodiness, and continued to extend something of a somebodiness. I found traces of an authentic community of perspective driven word-craft. I began to believe, perhaps wrongly, that I could learn to write without being subjected to a tyranny of hiding past experience.

***

Despite these traces, the experience of graduate school has been pretty staid. The hectic scheduling and balancing between teaching, studying, grading, being graded, reading, running the paper gauntlet of qualifying exams, prelims, dissertation, and one's own work, keep it busy but curiously static. In general the policies of hierarchy occlude and engender subtle tugs and pressures that embrace more of an ossified tradition than a dynamic process of conversation.

In the race for publication, awards, contacts, conference papers, I still feel as if I am losing something. In Marxist terms, our relations of production continue to embody a product driven, banking model of education while our talk centers on Foucault, Marx, and Friere. Free floating seminars on the open ranges of discussion, in which talk jumped the fences dividing psychology, philosophy, religion, sciences, literature, and rhetoric did not match the logic driven papers we were expected to produce; theory has not yet affected practice. Our dialogue at the graduate level can't seem to explode the stale forms of orthodoxy hiding within a refuge of system.

The effective mentors I have found recognize this. False mentors inculcate a continuing awe for authority, a regeneration of the humiliating

chain of indifference. This tendency is particularly insidious in a program based on writing, because we graduate students are writing ourselves in the hands of authority bent on forming us in its own image.

Graduate school seems bent on undoing our somebodiness. Somebodiness is not necessarily the bourgeois conception of separateness that some make it out to be. This view holds the personal as antithetical to social awareness or community action. I see the self differently.

Sometimes I sit with my two-year-old son, and we play with clay. I play the role of preserver: I work water into the clay to keep it pliable and moist; roll it into nice cup-sized cylinders so it will be easy to put away; and I make sure that the tops are on tight when we store the containers. My son is the destroyer, graduate student in miniature. Using his analytical fingers, he chops and tears the clay into awful shreds, pulverizing it with spoons and butter knives, before lumping it, in some new synthesis all back together so he can trade me for my neat little cylinders, new material for him to steamroll.

He is consummate bricoleur, and enjoys the clay for the marks he puts on it. But he not only makes up his forms as he plays, he lets the forms die in the light of criticism with no mean attachment to their lives or the fortunes of his career. Not that he embraces the irresponsibility of relativism, of course, because he does ask me to model forms, such as tractors or other renderings that catch his research interests.

He is the counterpart of the Grand Inquisitor. He is engaged in the most fundamental modes of meaning making. He is threat. He is contrary. He is the unmentored shaper of clay shaping himself. He would not long survive graduate school. Nor would Christ or Nietzsche make it far past many admissions committees.

I have found graduate school to be light on encouragement, on risky, original analysis and synthesis but long on name dropping, leader following, and orthodoxy. I don't know if given the functions and constraints of graduate school it can be otherwise. I don't know if the dynamism of myth making, literature reading, bricolage can survive in a structure devoted to performance, publication, and professionalism. I don't know if contrary impulses or epistemologies can exist in the already cramped quarters of English departments. I don't know if there is room for conversation or if a dialogue between them is possible.

I feel that most of my experience with mentoring has been in writing classes where tension between the clay of the bricoleur and the orthodoxy of the Inquisitor is not only named, but is strteched to bango-string tension through overt discussion. I doubt resolution is possible and that the only solution is no solution, but an embrace of continual, dynamic negotiation between convention and challenge, formation and disjunction.

***

If the intensified business and inertia of graduate school has hastened the slide into "nobodiness," it has also contained the seeds of its own undoing. Graduate school can never live up to its ideal of inculcating a unified body of coherent knowledge. Change thrives in the spaces created by contradictions. When the life world meets graduate school, powers might shift, a language of learning and mentoring might form.

My mentors are those who have engaged in the conversation constructing our discipline. We have discussed, confronted, and pressed each other beyond a phony sense of self and a pseudo sense of community (the ideal, homogeneous, and utopian community that I thought I would find in graduate school). My mentors have been my colleagues. We share

few illusions about our political position, our "situatedness." We are teachers; We are students. We are young turks; we are gate keepers. We resist authority; we represent authority. We are expected to master a corpus of material; we defy the material, remaking it to fit our backgrounds. We uphold standards and demand rigor; we invite experiment and spontaneity. We admit to ourselves and each other the dissonance of doubt in our roles, and confide the truths of discouraging days and wooden teaching.

We squander stolen time during office office hours, letting off steam through word play that touches a kind of mourning. My office mates show up in all their imperfections: wounded, searching, deeply caring about language and the big questions. Children, work, art, career, spouses and lovers-- the life world--populate our talk. I listen sometimes, in awe, as they elegantly portray and argue politics, sex, rhetoric, reading. Beneath their substantial eloquence, their mastery of office conventions, lies the person, the imperfect person with a shaky confidence that covers a fear that there is no place for her, that she will not be able to accommodate to the coercive silences of academic games like publishing and politicking. We share the domain of overwhelm, but we can talk; we can laugh; we can think. Through the talk we sustain.

Our talk is our rumination on our place: the interstice between theory and practice, between the social and the personal. It is our text, our personal essay, which is the negotiation between socially determined convention and idiosyncratic perspective; our talk mediates the disconnection between self and institution. The personal essay is sense making in the face of fragmentation, affirming its subject, but not claiming an absolute, final, irrefutable authority. Epistemology of the personal essay can be one derived from the particulars of experience, from salient

image, from the "physical fact" of Joan Didion. Rather than writing from a formed thesis or procrustean theory, we form our narratives from the fragmented grist of the evocative ordinary. Perspective forms our resistance to a silence normed by the needs of the university. The personal essay is inherently conversational, one voice saying "this is what I have seen," is written "somebodiness" and it can be the language and genre of authentic mentoring.

***

An indication of classroom dynamism is tension, creative tension produced by the pull of contraries. The classroom is a site in contention, in flux. It can perpetuate division and widening polarity, or it can work as a forum for framing change. The classroom, like mentoring, is a site of struggle. On the one hand, as teacher, I need to invite, to affirm, to honor the experience students bring with them to class,(to honor the self). On the other hand, I have a duty to evaluate student work, to enforce university standards (to convey conventions of the collective). This opposition may seem schizophrenic, but the tension it produces, the tension I would like as a student, can provide a container for creating a sense of "somebodiness," given that conversation informs the discourse. Students must both discover and communicate, be expressive and responsible to readers, experience chaos and impose order. We, as individuals, as instructors, have the split obligation both to coach student perspective and to reveal social requirements. Negotiating these oppositions requires struggle within them and against them.

University literacy is work, has a mixed bag of benefits and costs, and it is not easy. Students come to the university with questions of themselves, of their ability. I can never tell, on those first days of the

semester, in which pairs of eyes lights will go on. The students are wary, a little afraid, intimidated by the university and the demands of a first-year English class. I can see them wondering what I want, what they will have to do to pass the class, how they will have to submit to the requirements of the class, and the university community. They doubt that they have "say" in forming the course; they want to finish the work so they can return to the "real life" of friends, family, outside community; they wonder whether the experience they bring has any value within the baffling functions of the university; they wonder what they will have to give up.

As a graduate student, I have been naive about what I thought I could accomplish in seminar papers. Some of my efforts are embarrassments to me now. Despite some of the more outrageous claims I aspired to, the response to these papers has served either to nurture my interest in an area of study or kill it. I would rather have explored ways to BOTH effectively express my ideas AND feel engaged with the work I do.

The first assignment for incoming freshmen in English 101 is to write a personal narrative, a self-exploratory essay. We talk, as teachers, about the need for students to *engage* with the writing, to speak with an authentic voice, to discover and portray some emotionally significant statement about an experience they have had. In a sense, we need to ask them them to construct themselves and a meaning on the page. We ask them to be aware, to be "intact"-- intellectually, emotionally, psychologically. We should also ask the students to convey the salient elements of their experience to an audience. This requires control, discipline, study. They need to explore conventions of the essay, and put their material in a form that readers will find accessible.

If students can expand and unearth their interests through both self-examination and awareness of convention, they begin to juggle the

oppositions of self presentation social construction. The voice in the writing will be neither self-deprecating nor self-aggrandizing, but will show up, open, asking, dialogical; the subjects may begin to interest both the students and the teacher; argument may cease to be a merely logical exercise.

We need to ask ourselves and our students to look at words again, to pick them up and turn them over in their hands, deep artifacts--ask them to recover the words of their interest, their experience, and values, of finding and making a world from the words they can find that still carry some weight of personal meaning, of *care* about something. Leslie Silko says, in the opening of *Ceremony*, that our stories, our words, are all we have. If our stories, our experience, our values, our sense of self, our sovereignty over some domain of interest, remain detached, couched, or hidden; if we leave the student self behind in order for her to enter the academy, something vital will be lost: the student's academic work will lose its connection to social actuality. If we refuse to discuss and present some of the written forms of the academy, students won't gain access to it.

Finding words engaged with a sense of self, however, is only the beginning. The self of freshman composition does not have to be solipsistic; it can contribute to, challenge and enlarge a sense of community. The importance of self-absorption diminishes as the self grows, as the self appropriates, in its own terms, the values of the collective. The importance of the community and of service, unlike notions of romantic individualism, become the subjects of an engaged, critical forum.

There is something that we as scholars need to learn from telling our stories--our perspectives on the fields we study-- and from the power words when they are derived from the conversation between inclination

and convention. When we can embrace an epistemology of resistance and question, we can authentically mentor students with whom we work. This appraoch to writing, teaching, and learning can produce a ripple effect that will begin to address the rift between self, the life world, and institutions, specifically the university world. From this perspective, the unjaded graduate student mentioned in the joke of the graduate seminar, the student that drew the old guard's wrath, may fit more as a hero, as a role model, than a pariah.

How well do we respond to student questions, that, to us, seem unrehearsed, unfounded, but that may be genuine results of learning disequilibrium? The comments and the responses of the class after the graduate student who didn't know joke shows that, as the next generation of mentors, we graduate students can perpetuate or transform. I wonder if we will ask our students what they would like to pursue, what their interests are, as well as demonstrate, question, and challenge the conceptual conventions currently necessary to survive some of the academic gauntlet through which we ask them to run.

Teaching writing is a profession laden with tension and paradox. Within that tension lies potential. I am looking for the words that will constitute a dynamism and critique of psychological, social, and political systems. I have to find the words, and when I find them, to present them in ways the readers might comprehend. I think that my role as an instructor is to help students to uncover and assemble the words, the ideas, the perspective, that, to them, *mean*, that rise out of experience in the life world, out of a politics of accountability, out of awareness of lost opportunity, consequence of silence and "nobodiness." I think it will be almost enough to find the words that mean, that enlarge, that appropriate a

fluctuating, shared knowledge of the collective; almost enough. But that is good. It is a beginning. There is much listening to learn and talking to do.

Works Cited

Didion, Joan. "Why I Write." *New York Times Book Review* 5 Dec. 1976: 2, 98-99.

Levertov, Denise. Freeing of the Dust. Boston: New Directions, 1975.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals. New York: Doubleday, 1956.

Rodriguez, Richard. Hunger of Memory. New York: Bantam, 1983.

Rose, Mike. Lives on the Boundary. New York: Penguin, 1989.

Rosenblatt, Louise. Literature as Exploration. 1938. 3rd ed. New York: Noble and Noble and Noble, 1976.

Spellmeyer, Kurt. "Too Little Care: Language, Politics, and Embodiment in the Life World." College English. 55 (1993): 265-283.

Ueland, Brenda. If You Want to Write. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press,1987.